

# “For Work that Is Real”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands [and] crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies.

Greek amphoras and Hopi vases are put into museums  
but you know they were made to be used.

The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.<sup>1</sup>

Do you know that feeling?

Have you ever found yourself yearning for work that is real?

Do you find yourself struggling to figure out  
just what you're supposed to do with your life?

Whether you're seventeen or seventy,  
have you been wondering what you're going to be  
when you grow up?

If so, you're not alone.

These are questions that rightly crowd our attention.

They are questions that return to us time and again,  
as we move through the different stages of our lives—  
whether we're worrying about what comes after university,  
or what we'll do when our retirement party has come and gone.

These are also questions that are coming up for people  
in new ways and with a new sense of urgency

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<sup>1</sup> An adaptation of Marge Piercy's poem "To Be of Use," which the congregation has read responsively immediately before the sermon.

in this time of pandemic, as many find themselves wondering about their life's true purpose.

Now, to be clear, when I speak of “work that is real,” I’m not necessarily talking about your career. I’m talking about what each of us takes up as our life’s work.

I’m not talking about making a living, but about making a life— about the hopes and dreams that serve as a compass for our journey; about having a vision for ourselves and our work in this world, that so moves us that it both demands and deserves the deepest devotion of our hearts and hands.

Rarely do we dare ask one another about what makes each of us truly come alive.

Perhaps it’s too bold a question. Maybe it feels invasive, like prying.

All too often, in an effort to make polite conversation, we simply resort to asking kids what they want to be when we grow up. And adults what it is that they do or did for a living.

I’ve done it countless times, and I’m sure you have, too.

But this is the very definition of “small talk.” Talk that keeps our conversations and our lives small. Questions that miss the mark of what more is possible.

Just think how exciting a dinner party or a bus ride would be if we risked asking the bold question? The life-giving question?

*What is it that makes you come alive?*

So, I’m asking.

*What is it that makes you come alive?*

Do you know?  
Have you got it all figured out yet?  
Do you know what your life's work is?

It's one of the most important questions we could ever be asked,  
and it is a question I hope you hearing me ask of you, over and over.

What is your true work in this "one wild and precious life?"<sup>2</sup>  
And, are you doing it?

With the rising of the sun each day,  
are you living into this gift that you've been given?

Are you listening for the song of the universe  
sounding in your own soul?

Is the miracle of your own breath causing you to come alive,  
and to devote your days to living with meaning and purpose,  
to do what *only you* were born to do upon this earth?

I know that the answer for many if not most of us,  
at least right now,  
could well be a resounding "no!"

Janine Gliener, in response to a line in my blurb  
announcing this sermon,  
sent me to a podcast with the comedian Tom Papa,  
who points out that nobody is exactly  
living their best life these days.

But he goes on to say, even still, that "we're doing great."

And he's right.

I know the question of what makes us come alive  
may be a hard one, especially when many of us  
are contending with the fuzziness of "Covid-Brain"  
or struggling to juggle this strange season

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<sup>2</sup> From Mary Oliver's poem, "A Summer Day."

with all of its new demands on us.

But I know, too, that a life well-lived  
will never stray far from this question,  
even when we're living through the hardest of times.

To ask what makes us come alive  
is also to ask what's keeping us alive,  
what's sustaining us, or beckoning us on.

It has to be said that this isn't a question  
that we answer once and for all.  
The answer may change over time.

Our life's work may well take us our whole life long,  
and that's just as it should be.

Again, I'm not asking so much about what job  
you hope one day to hold,  
or about the careers you've had over the course of your life.

I'm inviting you to reflect on your life's purpose,  
your deep calling in this life,  
in hopes that you may respond to that call  
with every fiber of your being.

In reflecting on all of this myself,  
I've been thinking about my friend David.

David is a brilliant mathematician.

He has written over a dozen textbooks on computer programming.

He works as a systems analyst for a tech company.

But, if you were to ask David what he does and who he is,  
without skipping a beat, he would tell you that he's a dancer.

And, he is.

It's not how he makes his living,

but it is how he makes his life.

Yet, few people really understand this.

When he walked into his boss' office a few years ago  
and explained he wanted to work half-time  
so he could concentrate on dancing,  
he was met with blank stares, and then uproarious laughter.

He was incredibly successful.  
He was making lots of money.  
He had a promising career ahead of him.  
But what mattered most to him was dancing.

And so he told his boss he was prepared  
to leave his job behind, if need be, to take up dancing.

Clearly, David was yearning to fulfill his life's calling.

I've always admired his courage and his clarity.

Eventually, his boss did, too.  
And, today, David spends a lot of time dancing,  
and enough time writing textbooks to pay the rent.

Now, of course, in time, David's body  
will no longer be able to move in the ways he might like,  
yet, I know that he will have no problem  
figuring out what the next stage of his life's work is to be,  
because he's learned to listen and respond so well  
to the call of his life itself.

We don't often talk, as Unitarians, of responding to a call.

But I believe we all know something of that still, small voice,  
be it within us or beyond us, that calls out,  
that persistent voice that pleads, and prods, and pushes us  
into the fullness of our lives.

It takes courage to listen to that voice,  
and it takes courage to respond to its call.

Maybe that's why we tend to stick to the safe questions about what we do for a living rather than what we do for a life, because to actually share our deepest dreams with others might make us feel too vulnerable—and it might just make us uncomfortably accountable to working to make those dreams real.

When we ignore that voice,  
when we fail to heed its call,  
we too often find ourselves living out someone else's script,  
someone else's story, maybe trying to be  
something that we were never meant to be.

Over and over, I have seen people follow a path prescribed by others,  
rather than heeding what they know to be their true calling.

I know a woman who worked her way  
through several years of medical school,  
fulfilling her family's dream that she become a doctor,  
only to realize within months that she had made a horrible mistake  
and really wanted to be a minister instead.

She's an example to me of how persistent the call of life can be,  
but how patient, as well.

She reminds me that *even finding* our life's work  
can take a very long time, and that it may involve  
U-turns and significant detours along the way.

And she has also taught me that life isn't necessarily  
about reaching some final goal,  
for the journey itself is, as always, the destination.

And, every step along the path is a precious part our life, too,  
and to be cherished for the great gift that it is.

So, the yearning for work that is real  
may be just as important as the work itself.

For the work of our lives, if and when it is particularly real,

will challenge us to stretch and grow into the promise of our being.

Now, for some of us, this will mean some creative project  
or finishing some bit of research that the world still awaits.

For others, it involves repairing what is broken,  
overcoming hurdles no one else can see,  
or endeavouring to help build a better world,  
by moving through our days with more integrity,  
or living more gently upon the earth.

All of what we do  
will one day become what we have done.

All of our actions, everything done and left undone,  
can and will count toward the body of work we leave behind.

Now, some of you have no doubt figured all of this out.  
You've already found your life's purpose,  
and you haven't and won't let it go.

Every day, you take tenacious steps  
into your calling.

As for the rest of us, we may need more time,  
and we may need to learn to listen more deeply,  
to attune our senses to what life  
may be trying to say to us.

The poet Nancy Shaffer asks:

When you heard that voice and  
knew finally it called for you  
and what it was saying—where  
were you? Were you in the shower,  
wet and soapy, or chopping cabbage  
late for dinner? Were you planting radish  
seeds or seeking one lost sock? Maybe  
wiping handprints off a window  
or coaxing words into a sentence.  
Or coming upon a hyacinth or one last No.

Where were you when you heard that ancient  
voice, and did Yes get born right then  
and did you weep? Had it called you since  
before you even WERE, and when you  
knew that, did your joy escape all holding?

Where were you when you heard that  
calling voice, and how, in that moment,  
did you mark it? How, ever after,  
are you changed?  
Tell us, please, all you can about that voice.  
Teach us how to listen, how to hear.  
Teach us all you can of saying Yes.<sup>3</sup>

In our quest, in our yearning for work that is real,  
there is much that we can teach to one other.

So, may we learn to listen—to the call of life,  
within us, among us, and beyond us.

May we call forth the boldest of our dreams,  
by asking of one another the questions the matter most.

May we have work that is real all our life long,  
and may we have life  
until our work is done.

So be it.

## **Benediction**

I leave you with these words from the great Howard Thurman:

Don't ask yourself what the world needs;  
ask yourself what makes you come alive.  
And then go do that.  
Because what the world needs  
is people who have come alive.

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Shaffer, from her meditation manual *Instructions in Joy*.

